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PART 1

DISCOVERING THE J-CURVE



What Is the J-Curve?

What Is the Larger Theological
Framework of the J-Curve?

What Is the Connection between the
J-Curve and Justification by Faith?

“I Will Never Do This Again”

The J-Curve and How It Helps

Caring for someone affected by multiple disabilities is never boring. Life is generally pleasant, but at any given moment, you are seconds away from disaster—a part of your brain is always on. So to give my wife, Jill, a break, I decided to take our disabled daughter Kim with me on a speaking trip.

On a Friday in January 2001, Kim and I headed to the Philadelphia airport for a trip to Florida. We had two suitcases and a large box with “seeJesus” written on the side. As soon as we parked, Kim rummaged through the carry-on bag, only to discover that Jill had not packed the recorded book that Kim wanted. She began a low-level whine, one we’ve considered patenting and selling to CIA interrogators. Forget water torture; just play this tape of Kim and your prisoner will be putty in your hands.

When we got to the bus stall, I told Kim we had to wait for the bus, and her whining grew louder and more irritating. Everyone was looking at us. I glanced down at my box, wondering if there was any way I could hide the big “seeJesus” sign. I looked like a religious nut.

When the bus arrived, I had a horrible thought: “How will I get all this luggage and Kim on the bus at the same time?” I decided to help her on first, then return for the luggage. As I was getting on with

the luggage, much to Kim's delight, the back door closed on me. Her well-honed sense of humor kicked in, and she grinned broadly as she watched me shouting at the bus driver while being crushed by the door.

The ride to the terminal was uneventful—Kim is fine as long as she is moving. But when we got to the check-in area, we found a line that wrapped around the terminal. Knowing we'd never make our flight if we got in that line, I headed up the escalator, luggage and Kim in tow. As soon as we got to security, our line merged with another, forming one very long line—and Kim began whining again. Fortunately, she is adept at moving quickly in lines. She stands so close behind people that she bumps them. It's uncomfortable for them, but they see she's disabled and often let us go ahead.

When we got to the scanners, Kim wouldn't put her speech computer on the conveyer belt. She started arguing with the security person, typing out, "It's my voice." I yanked her "voice" out of her hand and put it on the belt, and she restarted her whining. Of course, security was suspicious of my "seeJesus" box, so a particularly scrupulous guard scanned it meticulously.

Once through security, we had twenty minutes before our gate closed. I checked the screen. We were in the wrong terminal. We were in Terminal C, but our flight was in B. There was no way we'd make it. I threw myself in front of one of the carts that carry people around and begged for a ride. The driver agreed and whisked us away, but as we came down the long ramp of Terminal B, we got stuck behind a man on his cell phone. Our cart was emitting a loud, persistent beeping, but the man did not pick up his excruciatingly slow pace. As Kim saw me getting tense, she started to smile again.

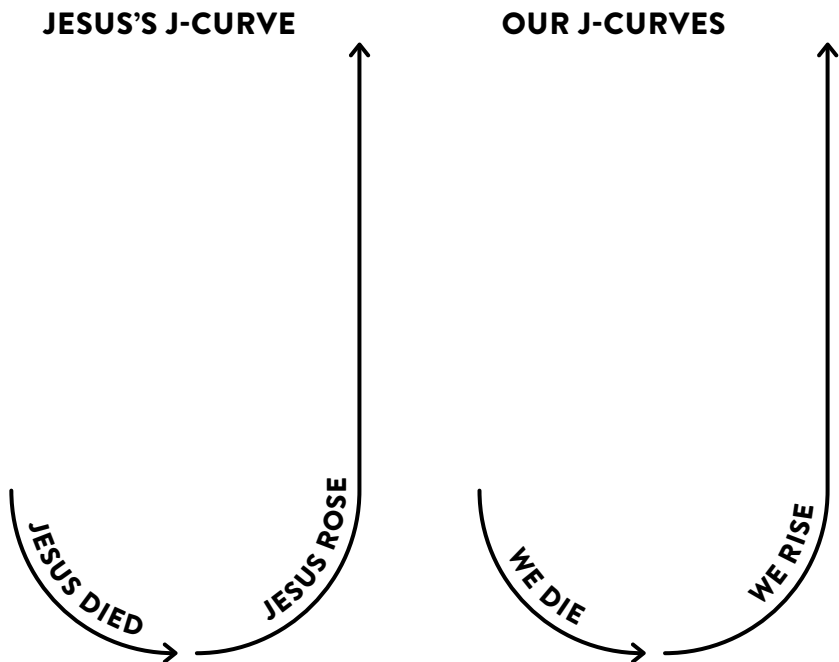
We made it to the plane, and after settling into our seats, my shoulders relaxed as I hooked Kim up to her audiobook. Then the flight attendant came by and told Kim to turn off her electronic devices. Kim turned off her audiobook, but refused to turn off her speech computer. I reached over and shut off the device—and Kim resumed her whining. A few minutes later, the captain announced, "We have eleven planes ahead of us, so it will be fifteen minutes before departure." Even though she could not see the line of planes, just knowing we

had to wait led Kim to a complete meltdown. I started to say, “Kim, if you don’t stop, we aren’t going to Disney,” but that was one of my reasons for taking her on this trip, so I swallowed my threat. Helpless and embarrassed, I said to myself, “This was a mistake. I will never do this again.”

The next day, Saturday, as I reflected on my reaction, I realized I’d forgotten the J-Curve, the idea, frequently articulated by the apostle Paul, that the normal Christian life repeatedly re-enacts the dying and rising of Jesus. I call it the J-Curve because, like the letter J, Jesus’s life first went *down* into death, then *up* into resurrection.

Just like the earthly life of Jesus, the J ends higher than it starts. It’s the pattern not only of Jesus’s life, but of our lives—of our everyday moments. When Kim and I were sitting in the back of the plane, I thought everything had gone wrong. No, the apostle Paul says, the J-Curve is the shape of the normal Christian life. Our lives mirror Jesus’s. In the diagram below you see Jesus’s J-Curve and our present J-Curves.

Fig. 1A. Jesus’s J-Curve and Our J-Curves



The J-Curve is the shape of the normal
Christian life. Our lives mirror Jesus's.

Keep in mind that Jesus's J-Curve atones for our sins; ours don't. His is once for all—we have multiple J-Curves that echo his. (For the sake of clarity, when I use the term J-Curve by itself I'm referring to our *present* J-Curves.) As we shall see, our J-Curves each have their own unique cadences, but they all

1. enter some kind of suffering in which evil is weakened or killed;
2. weaken the flesh and form us into the image of Jesus;
3. lead to a real-time, present resurrection.

Dying and Rising on the Way to Florida

As I reflected on how our travel disaster was the beginning of a J-Curve, our trip went from a lifeless gray to vibrant and multicolored. Like Jesus, I experienced a death followed by a resurrection. The two are inextricably intertwined. Friday's trip left me drained and weary (dying), which created a spirit of humility as I taught on Saturday (rising). On Saturday, I was in front of a group of people who were listening to my every word. I'm thankful they were such eager listeners, but being at the center of people's praise is potentially toxic. I'm prone to the leadership sins of overtalking and underlistening, so Friday's dying was God's gift to inoculate me against the pride lurking behind success and popularity.

The work of love that happens in a J-Curve exposes our hearts in unexpected ways. On Friday, in front of three different crowds (at the bus shelter, in the security line, and on the plane), I was far too concerned with how I looked. In fact, my desire to hide my "see Jesus" box at the bus shelter showed I was ashamed of him. The sign was dead-on—see Jesus in his humility; don't run from his path of weakness. In fact, that's the message of this book.

Resurrection has multiple faces. After that Florida trip, I told Kim I'd give her \$50 for letting me interview her at a Young Life banquet in Washington, DC. As I interviewed her about our Florida trip, she giggled, smacking her head at all the funny parts of the story. It

was a delight to watch her. After the interview, I stepped aside so she could take her speech computer off the podium and sit down, but she didn't budge. Instead with 250 people listening, she typed out on her speech computer, M-O-N-E-Y. In other words, “Dad, show me the money!” How's that for a resurrection?

The Right Time to Rediscover the J-Curve

The “collapse” Kim and I went through on our Florida trip is a microcosm of the cultural collapse Western civilization is going through. The rising tide of unbelief and the lure of secular liberalism touch almost every Christian home. Fifty years ago, we called the occasional child who walked away from the faith a black sheep. Now almost every Christian home has children walking away from the faith.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. A young wife, “Sarah,” from a healthy church confided to a friend of mine, “I think I've outgrown my marriage.” That's something you might say about an immature boyfriend, but Sarah said she had “outgrown” her sacred vows to her husband. She used therapeutic language to mask her betrayal.

Sarah's feelings operated at the center of her decision making. Almost certainly, Sarah encountered some immaturity in her husband, instinctively discarded the biblical morality she grew up with (“Be faithful in marriage”), and reached for the central moral vision of our age, which I'll call *feelism*.¹ By making “How does it/you make me feel?” our moral grid, feelism makes faithfulness—the glue of life—almost impossible. Feelism drives emotions to the center, distorting and amplifying them in the process. As we'll discover, the J-Curve not only balances our emotions but helps them come alive.

Our world is increasingly filled with people like Sarah who have inhaled the spirit of this age. To quote William Butler Yeats's poem “The Second Coming,” “the centre cannot hold.” So how does the church survive and even thrive when the world is going crazy from

1. A leading moral philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, writes, “The unrecognized philosophical power of emotivism is one clue to its cultural power.” *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 20. See pp. 6–22 for MacIntyre's description of the grip that emotivism (feelism) has on our culture. My son John and I coined the word *feelism*.

the care of the sacred self? As we shall see, there's no better time than now to rediscover what Jesus's dying and rising means. That's why I've written this book, to help prepare the bride, the wife of the Lamb, for suffering.

The J-Curve not only balances our emotions but helps them come alive.

But this is not a book on coping with suffering. My goal is to draw you, the reader, into the dying and rising of Jesus—to reset your sense of the normal Christian life, freeing you from cynicism and despair. Inhabiting the J-Curve promises to transform your entire vision of how you engage life, freeing you from the world of resentment, touchiness, and just plain old grumpiness, and inviting you into Jesus's world, a world rich with joy, hope, and love.

We will pay attention to two cultural lenses that prevent us from living the J-Curve: the lenses of the manager and the therapist.² For example, the manager looks at my flight with Kim and says, “You should have left more time for traveling with Kim” (true), “It's not wise to combine too many things like speaking and caring for Kim” (possibly), and “You should have brought someone to help you” (yes, I did that the next time). The therapist tells me, “You need to do something for yourself” (true), then asks, “Do you have a problem with anger?” (yes, Kim brings out the best and the worst in me) or “Have you thought of putting Kim in a home?” (no, she's God's gift to us; plus she's one of my best friends). Both the manager and the therapist have pieces of wisdom, but they miss love. Because they play it safe, they miss life in all its richness. They miss that not only was God resurrecting my soul and saving me from pride during my trip with Kim, but also that my mini-death gave Jill a mini-resurrection. That's how love works.

When I felt ashamed and frustrated with Kim, I mirrored the state of the church. I'd forgotten the J-Curve. Just as Martin Luther redis-

2. I prize the skilled work of many managers and therapists. I do both in my work. I'm critiquing, as you'll see, a whole cultural mind-set or value system.

covered justification by faith in the early 1500s, we need to rediscover the J-Curve in today’s rising storm of unbelief and evil.

Like a diamond, each facet of the J-Curve refracts the light in a slightly different way on the wonder of Jesus’s death and resurrection. In the upcoming pages, we will journey with the apostle Paul as he lives and teaches the J-Curve in his writings and his life.

You might think I’m overstating the importance of the J-Curve. But the apostle actually writes more about the J-Curve than he does justification by faith, which is his focus in Romans and Galatians. But the J-Curve dominates Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans 6 and 8, Colossians 1 and 3, and Ephesians 1, and it is modeled in Philemon, 1 Thessalonians, and Acts. Beginning with Philippians, we’ll focus on Paul’s J-Curve writings.

When I explained the J-Curve to a group of pastors, they wondered why they’d never heard it before. One said, “I guess we are more focused on the theological than the practical.” I said, “No, our theological vision is too narrow.” My goal is to add to our Romans/Galatians lens a neglected Pauline lens: the J-Curve.

At each point, our understanding of the J-Curve and how it transforms our everyday life, even our emotions, will become clearer. Here’s an overview of what we’ll cover:

- Part 1, “Discovering the J-Curve,” introduces the J-Curve and explores the relationship between the J-Curve and three great truths of the Reformation: (1) the flesh, (2) justification by faith, and (3) union with Christ. The lack of integration of the J-Curve with these truths has led to theological imbalance and thus weakness in how we do life.
- Part 2, “Dying with Jesus,” is where we begin to follow the path of the J-Curve down into death and then up into resurrection. Part 2 gives an overview of three different types of J-Curves, then takes a deeper look at the *repentance* J-Curve, where we put to death our sins, and the *suffering* J-Curve, where outside suffering leads us into dying with Jesus.
- Part 3, “The Descent of Love,” explores the *love* J-Curve, where love leads to suffering, by looking at Jesus’s descent of love. We examine the DNA of love—humility and incarnation. By DNA, I mean a deep structure that permeates the whole. We

also look at the danger of getting stuck in dying and making an idol out of humility.

- Part 4, “Rising with Jesus,” focuses on the resurrection side of the J-Curve. We watch Paul look at life through a resurrection lens. He creates a tapestry of love as he embodies Jesus’s dying and rising in his and his coworkers’ lives. We follow Paul in his travels to discover insights into the art of living life in the dying and rising of Jesus.
- Part 5, “Forming a J-Curve Community,” shifts our focus from the individual to the community. Paul uses the J-Curve to re-shape an entire community into the image of Jesus. We descend into the nitty-gritty of life in the ancient world as Paul uses the J-Curve to relentlessly confront a culture that has kept the gospel from forming a true Jesus community.

Because this book is about the gospel in everyday life, I’ve intertwined my own stories with those of others—Luther, Mother Teresa, and Joni Eareckson Tada. But our main focus is on the apostle Paul’s journey for Jesus and into Jesus. Along the way, we’ll encounter leaking Dixie cups, bench-warming hockey players, a sheep named Ed, and a host of everyday problems. These stories don’t illustrate the J-Curve; they embody it, with the goal of helping you retell your stories in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. To “embody” simply means that you give a tangible or visible form to an idea.

Welcome to our pilgrimage into the wonder of the gospel!